MOSTISH WILL SPEAK ON DARKNESS

By Neil Chapman

> … For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others.1

Windsor Mostish will speak on darkness. He has been invited to contribute to this evening's event on the basis of research pursued over a number of years, which he will describe in loose terms as an inquiry into darkness. In film, visual art, and literature the motif of the dark is appealed to frequently. Mostish is collecting references. Commonly, darkness is used to invoke difficulty of one kind or another – often difficulty concerning knowledge. In a famous literary case, a character in Virginia Woolf's novel To The Lighthouse contemplates selfhood as a "core of darkness."2 Related examples in the history of film are numerous. One need only think of the night-shot presented from the perspective of a character trying to piece together the nature of the threat from clues at the limits of the senses – a movement, a sound emanating from the depths of the night.

However, if darkness invokes mystery the interest is not simply in the variety of ways that it does so. Mostish concedes that his habit of collecting references has at times been a disincentive to the more rigorous consideration of particular cases. He will begin correcting that tendency this evening. There is, Mostish proposes, an ambiguity illustrated by the cases that fascinate him most: the paradox of the thing presented to us as unknown, which the artist or the write then persuades us is unknowable. The

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1 Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996), 95-96.
2 Ibid.

alteration takes place as if by a sleight of hand. We are led to accept the mystery as an inevitable limit of knowledge. Mostish's project, when he stakes it out properly, will be to show not that there is anything necessarily suspicious in the artist's desire to invoke the unknown, but that we should ask how darkness is used to this end, why we are persuaded when the unknown becomes unknowable – why the darkness in question cannot be illuminated – and why the viewer, the reader, becomes complicit in this hidden operation.

Think again of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf's character, and her contemplation of what it is that constitutes the essence of self. On one level, the sequence of thought that Woolf exposes seems to be made in seriousness and in good faith; it may have been Woolf's sequence of thought too. And yet one suspects that the confidence with which Mrs. Ramsay answers the questions of her own inquiry is being posed by Woolf as another factor for interrogation. The likely implication of an author's own persona within a novel's characterisation is part of what gives fiction its affective force, Mostish proposes. And fiction in turn is a method that can contribute to other forms of inquiry. It is not simply that by allowing misshapen and ill-formed thoughts to be exposed something is said about the conditions out of which thought emerges; more profoundly the peculiarity of the image in fiction testifies to a labour not bounded by the conventions of exposition (philosophical, theoretical, literary), spoken or written. The essential self as a core of darkness is one such image left unbounded. Where the task of literary theory for instance would be to write about what it means, in the normal course of reading, the image lends itself to a kind of thought less predictable in the forms of its outcomes. It is not insignificant in this regard that Woolf's novel – replete with evidence of her own readings of philosophy – has a central chapter in which the image is presented of a garden in the process of overgrowing: "Let the wind blow,"she writes, "let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage."3 This mutant proliferation is the potency also of the image in writing.

[3] Ibid. 206.

In answer to the question – "What is it that constitutes a self?" – Woolf's character settles for a solution that does little more than negotiate a peace with her lack of understanding. It is enough for Mrs. Ramsay to locate a place in which the answer resides, to take comfort from a belief that although it is not at all clear what it is, at least the general location of the self in space can be determined. As a "core" the implication is that this essence of selfhood might be found within the body's frame, but we know the contents of the ribcage and there is no such wedge-shaped organ. To make it "dark" renders the impossibility less stark. In that way, the self as a "core of darkness" is implied to be simultaneously there and not there.

Taking its form from a common sense in which the parameters of the body demarcate the space in which the self resides, the image of the darkness in the centre insists on its potential to signify. Its compelling material implausibility brings it again and again to the forefront of thought. To say more would be to risk trivialising what we have called the "labour" of the image. But perhaps the risk is worth taking – if not for his audience then at least for Mostish himself, who is well used to managing the deviations of his research. Defining its space in the midst of organs that have evolved in intimate proximity to one another, as a wedge, the dark core imposes itself. Though it is void, it presses apart a space in which to reside. Despite this aggressive insistence, being of the body, its interface with the organised interior is operative in the way the body would demand; the dark core's edges are thresholds between the body and what is alien to it, but where that body/not- body distinction is left unstable.

The affirmation of security that Woolf writes into her character's thought about selfhood spoils the form of the character's thought; she who has questioned, has chosen contingencies as answers because the insecurity of not knowing is, for her, intolerable. The inability to stand a lack of knowledge, in this instance particularly, is ironic: it testifies to an assumption that the self is coherent only on account of establishing secure knowledge, and specifically secure knowledge of itself. What Woolf presents is a picture of the enterprise of thought rendered bankrupt. But she presents it in such a way that it initiates thought. The reader appreciates this less through the

following of an argument than by being exposed to the claustrophobia of the character's unwarranted confidence. The message is all the clearer because it emanates not from an expected source; neither quite from the novel's character nor from the author. It is materialised as the self-affecting of the reader's reading. Woolf's more profound point – her emerging discovery – is that thought's path is not confident. To be worthy of the name, thought must maintain vulnerability.

The references that Mostish has mentioned already come from his larger collection of cases in which metaphors of darkness are presented in art, literature, and philosophy. He has begun with a time-consuming elaboration on Woolf – more time-consuming than he intended but useful all the same in helping him to warm up for the presentation of a sequence of his research that will be the main focus of his presentation this evening. All that's been said on Virginia Woolf is by way of preamble. In fact he now wishes to establish another starting point. Mostish is not oblivious to the confusion that his second beginning might provoke, coming as it does when he is already half-way through his allotted time. All the same, he leaves the matter uncommented upon so as to better imply urgency in these remarks. Though he is the speaker, he is only just managing to control ideas that are clearly in possession of their own motivation to speak: such is the rhetoric of his delivery. It is important for him on this occasion to begin elsewhere, he says. An origin of the research can be found in his own childhood. Although his work puts him in the position now of being able to speak about the issues in a more informed way, the philosophical aspect of his inquiry into darkness is not something added. It was there from the start in an event grasped by him then as significant although he was no more than eight years old.

In the grounds of the Cathedral, there was a deep well. A dome-shaped iron grid painted black like the railing around the grounds made it possible to lean over the edge and to look into the hole without risk. Windsor had enjoyed dropping stones into the well. He did not visit the Cathedral without performing this game, usually repeating it, although to say that he "enjoyed" the game is already to misrepresent what was happening. Dropping the stone

into the darkness invoked a sensation that, if it had been simply pleasurable, would not have compelled him to return and to repeat it in the way that he did. His action was more like a compulsion.

The dropping of a stone in these circumstances seems to be determined by two events plotted in time: the first is the moment that the stone leaves the grip of the hand, the second is the instant of its contact with the surface below. Mostish gestures to illustrate. But crucially, he wants to propose, these parameters need to be defined more carefully. Rather than the moment of its release, it is the stone's disappearance from sight that matters as it falls into the darkness. And likewise, what's crucial is not the hard surface below against which the stone is dashed, so much as the sound of the contact that returns from hidden depths. A realisation of the difference between these alternative framings marks the distinction between, on the one hand, what would remain a game played by a child and, on the other, a procedure that has the capacity over years – over the course of a lifetime – to yield material for thought. Again, it is only more recently that Mostish has been able to think back on the scenario and to articulate the distinction. But the fact that he can do so is evidence of a sensitivity in his possession to begin with, one he was exercising with every repetition of the procedure, even while not being conscious of it. Though he may seem to be claiming this sensitivity for himself, that is not his aim. Rather, with the common nature of the game, Mostish means to suggest that the potential beginnings for philosophical thought are common, even if the development of such thought is achieved less frequently.

If there has been a delay in Mostish's formalising of his research project on the implementation of the motif of darkness it is the result, to some extent, of a fundamental tension that resides in his classification of the inquiry. The ideas seem to come in a form that aspires towards philosophical method (driven no doubt by his reading). But when he attempts to embark upon this method, he is halted by a realisation that what he has to work with is not a series of concepts proper to philosophy, but images. The image is an obstacle – one that he cannot circumvent because of its part in defining the route for thought to which he is committed. In this case, the image is of a falling

stone, a stone suspended in its state of falling, which seems to be kept suspended there in the darkness all the more effectively by the uncertainty of the parameters that should define a beginning and an end for the sequence, but which do not do so. Halted by the image, the continuity of his thought could be maintained only by changing its form. This is the opportunity – the hope – for all practitioners whose work falls hopelessly into the deep shafts between disciplines. And Mostish sympathises. He expresses his solidarity, confessing in a self-depreciating way – which his audience may be convinced by or not – that he is neither philosopher, nor novelist, nor artist.

It is worth thinking the scenario through again. The darkness of the well is decisive. If light had penetrated its depths the young Windsor would not have been drawn as he was. Perhaps there was a first experimental drop conducted for no identifiable reason, simply as the random act of a child at play. But Mostish is not convinced. Even that first drop, which has receded into obscurity, was surely marked as repetition. While his return to the well involved a certain replaying of memorised actions, more profoundly, it was a reconstitution of an experience that was by its nature somehow not compatible with the usual faculties of memory.

On a previous occasion, trying to lay hold on precisely why he had come to value the scenario, Mostish concluded that the duration of the fall was a peculiar kind of time. It was so on account of the fact that the termination of the drop, which common sense dictates should come at the end, seemed to be drawn after the fact into the extensive period of the stone's falling. This, he thinks, was an equally important insight. To say that forgetting is part of the constitution of the dropping activity is likewise to render the time of the drop complex in a way that time is not in more ordinary activities. In contrast to the simple game, the dropping act is impossible to figure except as a thing peculiar to this moment. Consequently, the actor – the stone-dropper – is peculiar to the moment too.

The sensation is difficult to describe. It has to do with anticipation. The stone is dropped in order to produce the sound of its coming to rest at the bottom of the well. Given that there is a starting point and an end with the

procedure taking place between, the activity could be thought to be about the measurement of that space.4 But in a more profound way, what Windsor Mostish was doing – what every thoughtful child who drops a stone into a dark hole does - has nothing to do with measurement. Whatever it is that gives its nature to anticipation, it is not the act of counting, in fact, it is more like the suspension of counting. If counting is what light facilitates by way of sight as a body moves through space (a counting of steps, of milestones, of partitions) then darkness – the darkness of the well – draws attention to another quality of the world elided by all the many forms of sight-coordination.

Here is where the distinction between alternative ways of presenting the parameters of the drop becomes important. In the more accurate account that Mostish wishes to endorse for his audience, there is still a commencement and a termination, but as punctual instances they are rendered strategically unclear. The stone is dropped, it is accelerated by gravity. As the distance between hand and stone increases, so the stone disappears from sight. The infinitesimally short period of time in which that disappearance takes place risks the account degenerating into absurdity, Mostish concedes. But to lay out the thought this way is necessary. It invokes a question of what the witness sees at the limits of sight, what he or she is capable of seeing and registering in this tiny fraction of time. With the question, the disappearing stone returns. It returns in the form of an image – an afterimage rendering the stone both there and not there. And just as the precise moment of the commencement of the drop is made undecidable by the natural limits of vision, so the moment of termination for a stone cast into darkness is made undecidable by the sound of its contact that takes time to return – that indeterminacy being compounded by echoes that disrupt and divide the sonic evidence.

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[4] This is the assumption made by a character in *Hear My Song* directed by Peter Chelsom, another of the references from Mostish's collection. The scene shows a rock being dropped into a deep well. Micky O'Neill (played by Adrian Dunbar) takes his friend to see the well, commenting that 'nobody knows how deep it is.' Dropping a rock into the well and counting as he does so, Chelsom's character is merely shielding himself from the destabilising effect, which appears all the same as the strange silence between each spoken numeral. The profundity of the scene is curtailed by comedy that follows.

When he wrote about it previously, Mostish was keen to conclude on this point and he will do so in his rehearsing of the thought on this occasion too. The act of dropping a stone into darkness precipitates a “slipping away of the known world.” These were the words he used. He had been trying to describe something like a sense of slow spinning or an unusual moving implication of discrete things. It was as if, despite the motionlessness of the figure pictured there at the mouth of the well – hand suspended in an open gesture, stone just released – the similarly suspended moment of the object’s fall liberated another kind of movement. The figure, the well, the cathedral; the whole scenario was drawn together by a paradoxical dynamism within stillness, which seemed to present itself to him as the life of the scene. This conclusion might have been not all bad. He was suspicious of it, but it left the ideas rolling in some direction and that had been its quality. The more recent visit to the topic has given him something else – perhaps a few other things – other images. These do not contradict his previous findings, nor do they repeat them precisely. As they settle, as he thinks over what he has said and how his audience has reacted, it will be easier to establish the overlaps and non-correspondences that mark the differences between one visit to the theme and another. Such is Mostish’s work, his project on the theme of darkness.